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HERBERT LESLIE BURRELL

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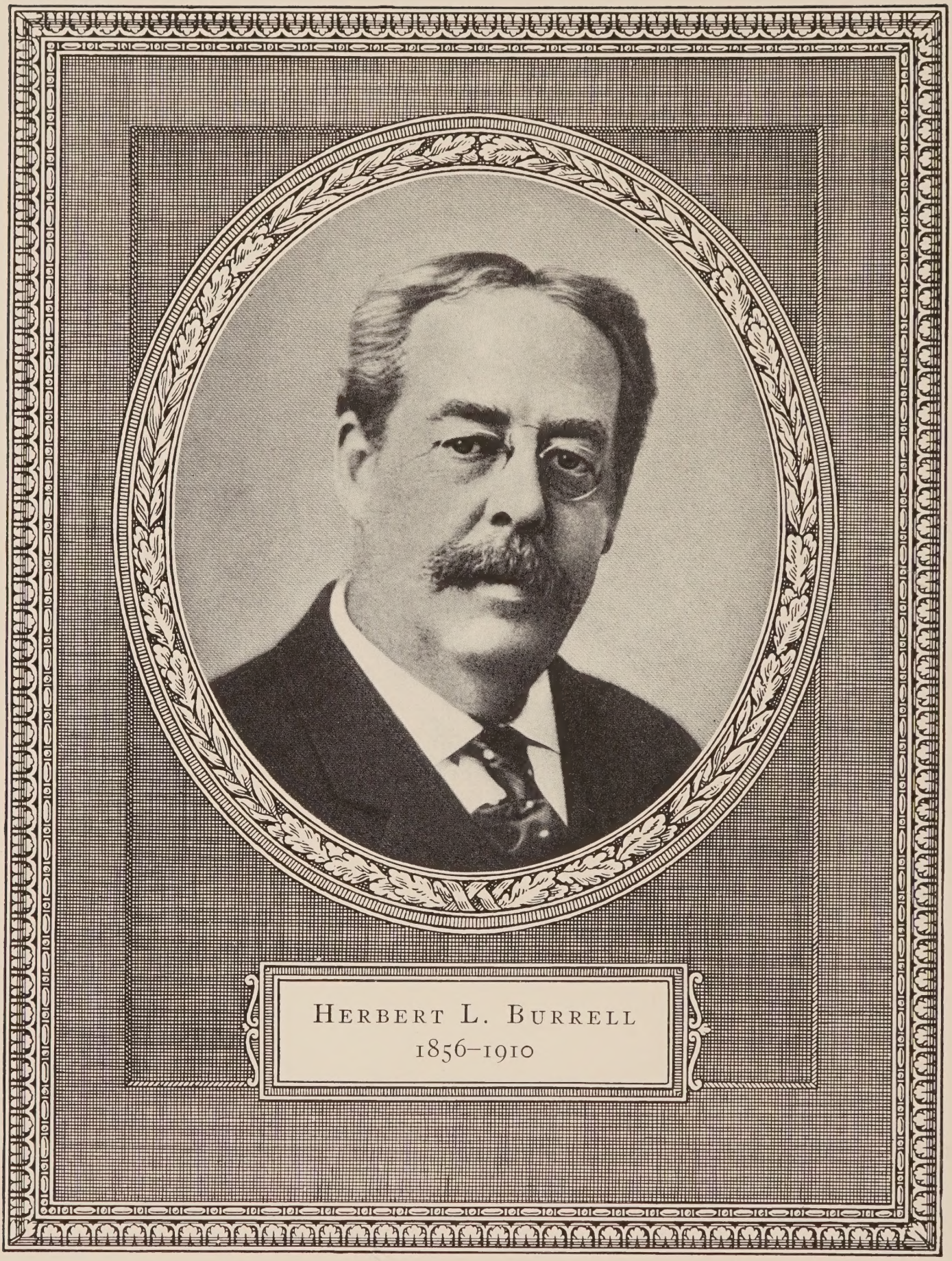

HERBERT L. BURRELL
1856–1910

HERBERT LESLIE BURRELL

He had a passion for service

By TOWNSEND W. THORNDIKE, M.D., Cambridge, Massachusetts

SOMETIME surgeon on the staff of the Boston City Hospital, surgeon-general of the State of Massachusetts, professor of surgery in the Harvard Medical School, medical superintendent of the hospital ship Bay State, president of the Massachusetts Red Cross Society, past grand master of the Massachusetts Lodge of Masonry, and president of the American Medical Association—by these titles may be epitomized the work of the subject of this sketch before he passed on to eternity.

Nature was generous, I might say lavish, in the bestowal of her gifts on him. She provided him with a well porportioned frame, surmounted by a fine head adorned with a distinguished face and a strong, imaginative mind. Supplementing it was an unusual gracious and magnetic personality, which made him a rare companion and friend.

Some of his minor characteristics that have impressed my memory were his delightful conversational power, attic in quality and seasoned by mature judgment, and his omnivorous tastes. At one time he sang baritone in a church choir and for this service he was presented with a gold watch, which he carried during his life. At another time he became interested in target shooting, going to England with the All-American Rifle Team, which won the match. He early became fascinated with military matters, eventually attaining the rank of major in the picturesque troop, "The Boston Lancers." Later he became medical director of the First Brigade, M.V.S.M. In connection with this subject he indulged in the pastime of making a collection of illustrations of the world's military uniforms. Again, he devoted his attention to improving the transportation apparatus and the personnel of the hospital corps.

In his early medical career when he had more leisure, he was a prolific writer. His textbook on surgery remains incompleted because of the caprice of the Unknown Force. It is to be noted that this book was the first and only thing he ever essayed to do and left undone, although the manuscript was ready for the publisher. With him, to begin was to finish. Thus in medicine, Masonry, and the military he quitted only at the top.

Easy in manners, soft in voice, and with a self-confidence singularly free of prejudices and egotism, he was at home, whether it was in the amphitheatre, at

the Court of St. James, or in domestic circles. A cosmopolite in traits and habits, Burrell was essentially a man of the world. That he held office or membership in many miscellaneous clubs, societies and associations, and was visiting surgeon or consultant to important hospitals is to be taken for granted. A mere catalogue of them would be both prosaic and a waste of space.

Burrell was born in Boston, April 27, 1856. His father was engaged in the manufacture of pianos. He sprang from a typical New England family. His progenitors were English who early came to Massachusetts Bay Colony.

He began his battle of existence without the support of friends influential in the profession or the benefits derived from a college education. All that he won was due to his own self-development and determination. In some measure his success may be referred to the effort demanded to surmount the barriers that he encountered, for he was one of those whose forces are fed by obstacles and whose resolution hardens in the face of difficulties. When about 18 or 19 years of age, he entered a broker's office in New York. While employed in this manner, he happened to go with a medical student to one of the surgical clinics to witness an operation. In speaking about this incident later in life, he said that the art at once attracted him and he felt that he could improve on the technique or rather lack of technique that the operator displayed. Thereupon he returned to Boston and entered the Harvard Medical School, graduating when he was 23 years old. The careful thought that he gave this determination to become a doctor was typical of the man in all his future activities. In no sense did he drift into the profession.

Thus he made his advent into a profession where intellectual satisfactions are more precious than gold, where apparently trivial things become baffling, profound, and fascinating; where revelation follows observation and skillful questioning; and where wonder grows with knowledge.

His first wife was Lillian T. Thorndike, daughter of the widely known Boston surgeon, William H. Thorndike. About two years after the death of his first wife he married Miss Caroline W. Cayford. This marriage was the outcome of a romance of the Spanish-American war, when he met Miss Cayford on board the hospital ship Bay State where she was serving under him in the capacity of head nurse. From the second marriage he had an issue of two sons.

Even before he received his degree in medicine, he was appointed to the staff of the Boston City Hospital and remained connected with this institution during his entire life, being made surgeon-in-chief in 1907. His teaching career began with his appointment as demonstrator in bandaging and apparatus at the Harvard Medical School in 1887. In the following 20 years he was made successively, instructor, assistant professor, professor of clinical surgery, and finally a full professor in 1907. During these years he devoted much time to the development of the Children's Hospital and orthopedic surgery.

Dr. E. H. Bradford in referring to his activities before the Boston Historical and Memorial Society says: "For any one in a few weeks to have organized and equipped a relief ship is no small achievement but it was the work of a master mind to have transformed a coaster into a model hospital ship, studied abroad and prized by the national government. Any one who had an opportunity to visit the hole of the Bay State on her return from Santiago with her precious cargo of fever-stricken Massachusetts soldiers, and to bear witness to the fact that the air even over the bilge keel was as fresh as that of the open ocean, and who saw a service and organization superior to that of the best of hospitals, could recognize the debt not only of the suffering Massachusetts soldiers, but that of the commonwealth, to this volunteer surgeon, who directed and commanded three expeditions of relief during that summer of anxiety and confusion.

As a surgeon-general of our state he greatly increased the efficiency of the medical service of the militia and he left it a model in excellence of equipment.

His work on the reception committee for the Boston meeting of the American Medical Association placed him foremost among organizers for such undertakings, and in the reorganization of the Red Cross Society, in the establishment of the Society of Military Surgeons, as secretary of the National Surgical Association, and as president of The Massachusetts Medical Society he proved the high quality of his leadership. The presidency of the American Medical Association came to him as a well won honor, but his careful plans for the advancement of the interests of that powerful organization were frustrated by the malady which brought his labors to an end.

The practice of surgery in America 30 years ago was excellent in quality, but there were marked defects in our hospital organizations which cramped the development of the average surgeon. Three months of active hospital surgical work and 9 months of general practice did not offer the best chance for the training of surgeons of the greatest experience. Dr. Burrell endeavored to establish a continued service in the place of the short service then universal in American hospitals, and he succeeded early in his career in arranging a continued surgical service at the Boston Children's Hospital, although in the large civic hospital with which he was connected all of his professional life the establishment of a single continued service under one head was impossible. The grouping of services of a selected number of surgeons, graded according to skill and seniority, and working under one leadership, seemed to give the organization many advantages. It furnished a stimulus from combined efforts with a single direction continued from year to year. This system was finally adopted largely through the efforts of Dr. Burrell.

The teaching of surgery, formerly consisting of brilliant lectures by surgical leaders or clinics where the masters of their craft displayed their skill in rare operations to a sensation-loving class, needed to be changed. The careful study of

patients, by small groups of students, who, under the direction of trained teachers, learn thoroughness of observation and skill of hand, presents a system of education which is of high excellence, but one which needs the enrollment of a number of earnest instructors, working less for personal advancement than from devoted interest in their profession. It was to the development of this system that Dr. Burrell gave the chief energies of his life.

His literary labors show extraordinary industry and cover an extensive and varied field in surgery, medical education, and non-professional articles. Some of the operations which he successfully performed marked a new era in surgical procedure. Thus he reduced a fracture of the spine, supposing it was done for the first time, though afterward he discovered that a similar operation had been performed by Weist. This method of treating fractures of the spine lowered the mortality more than 33 per cent. He was the first to replace a trephine button as a whole. He treated a case of anthrax with complete recovery, the first in many years and reported it as original although it was later found that his method was one that had once been employed but forgotten. He removed from a patient the sternum and sternoclavicular articulation, ligating the innominate artery and was rewarded by complete success, the recovery being the third known in the annals of surgery. He devised a new and original operation for obviating habitual or recurrent dislocation of the shoulder, and this method based on sound anatomical grounds was recognized by later writers of textbooks. He was the first in America to establish the diagnosis of traumatic apnœa or asphyxia in a living patient.

Among his conspicuous attributes were his power as an organizer and administrator, and the ability he possessed of being able to select men and get them to carry out a piece of work without further oversight on his part. He was essentially a constructive worker. Burrell was without qualification a superb idealist. When once convinced that his course was right he pursued it unrelentlessly and with a slavish devotion. A friend who knew him well remarked that the dominant note in his life could be summed up in the caption which I have written under the title of this sketch.

It is not surprising that a man of such vigorous energy, and positive nature should have created opposition to his projects. He naturally had a high temper which, however, he usually held in control. He was, nevertheless, a generous opponent and was ever ready freely and frankly to admit his mistakes.

For a student, interne, young doctor, or colleague to have his friendship meant that he had a recommendation both powerful and far-reaching. To be associated with him made medical preferment almost certain.

Before I end this record of the 54 years of the life of Herbert Leslie Burrell I do wish in the words of the prophet Isaiah that I may again "declare his doings, make mention that his name be respected, for he did many excellent things."